

Red Cross reunites sisters

Local office helps bring sisters together after 20-year separation

By SrA. Jeff Capenos
Public affairs

Imagine searching the Internet, pouring through books at the library and using investigative services to desperately find a long-lost family member.

For years, the search continues without any luck. Then one day you get a phone call from someone saying she's your sister.

This may seem an ideal topic for a celebrity talk show. But it isn't T.V.

This is the true story of a sergeant at RAF Laekneath, who after years of searching, finally broke through and made a connection with her older sister who she hasn't seen in more than 20 years.

Thanks to the American Red Cross, TSgt. Eldonna Fernandez, 48th Contracting Squadron, is currently in New Jersey getting reacquainted with her sister, Carol.

"This is something I've been looking forward to for a very long time," Fernandez said. "For 20 years, I've been alone without any blood relatives. But now, POW! I've got an instant family. It's great!"

When Fernandez was a young girl living with her family in Texas, her sister Carol, who is 13 years older, married a man and moved away from home to Pennsylvania, causing a rift in the family. From that day on, the girls never saw each other.

"It was a situation where my sister and father got into an argument, and she moved away," Fernandez said. "From there, we never saw each other again.

"You see, my mother died when I was 12. And after I joined the Air Force, when I was 20, my father passed away," she explained. "So there I was, without any family. I felt really alone. That's why I began looking for my sister."

During the past 15 years, Fernandez used every possible resource she could think of to find her. But it was Maria Fox, a co-worker in her office, who suggested trying the American Red Cross family search program. In fact, it was Fox who actually called the Red Cross, and forced Fernandez to talk to them.

"I knew how bad she was feeling," Fox said. "It was getting close to the holidays, and I could see it was bothering her. My daughter, who is a volunteer at the Red Cross office, and I were talking about it and she mentioned the family search program. So I just made Eldonna try it. The Red Cross did all the work."

After speaking with and collecting information from Fernandez, the Red Cross set to work trying to find her sister. The local Red

Cross sent a message to the American Red Cross office in Philadelphia Dec. 19. A week later in the early hours of the morning, Fernandez was woken up by a phone call.

"It was a little strange," Fernandez said. "My husband woke me up really early and said I had a phone call. I asked who it was, and with this big smile he said it was my sister."

After the first phone call, the two sisters have spoken with one another at least once a week, either through mail or over the phone.

"Getting to know Carol again has been really cool," Fernandez said. "We've exchanged photos and letters, and got caught up on each others lives and even compared notes on what our family tree looks like. We've even discovered a few interesting things, like the fact that her son shares a birthday with my youngest daughter."

Making her life-long dream to be reunited with her sister a reality, the two sisters met one another face-to-face this week at Carol's home in New Jersey.

"This whole thing has been amazing," Carol said. "I never thought we'd meet up again. I mean, I've done a little research to try find Eldonna but it never really worked out. But it's great to have a sister again."

"I'm really looking forward to doing all the things that families do," Carol said. "Sharing everyday life, sharing holidays, sharing everything. Having a sister again is going to be great."

Testing

From page 11

DODDS will serve as a model for the rest of the country, Cohen said.

"We are doing exceptionally well now, and we want to prove to the country that we certainly can meet any national or international standards. If we can do that in the military schools, we can do it anywhere in the country."

In 1995, DODDS issued rigorous academic standards as part of a comprehensive improvement plan, Cohen said.

"They have started to raise graduation requirements even further in all overseas high schools. They have established home-school partnerships to bring parents into the educational decision-making process."

DOD's fourth grade students rank eighth among 48 jurisdictions on standardized math test, Cohen said. Earlier this year, North Carolina's governor awarded Fort Bragg schools the Excellence in Education Award for early childhood education. The Depart-



Students take a break for lunch in their new cafeteria.

Photo by SSgt. Steve Ball

ment of Education gave national excellence awards to LeJeune's elementary and middle schools. LeJeune high school is the top-scoring school in North Carolina on the American high school mathematical exam.

Cohen attributed DODDS success to involved parents.

"These programs can't succeed unless we have the active engagement of parents work-

ing with their children," he said. "One of the reasons our students and school score so well is that parents also take education of their children and of themselves very seriously."

About 95 percent of all recruits hold high school diplomas compared to about 75 percent of America's youth, Cohen said. Most recruits enroll in the Montgomery GI Bill, which provides money for advanced education.